

Religious Action Center 50th Anniversary Interview

Congratulations on your jubilee anniversary. The Religious Action Center is a pillar of Washington's public affairs community.

Rabbi Saperstein, you took over as Director of the RAC right around the same time I arrived in Washington. Throughout the years I have always valued your conviction and determination to take on difficult issues. Your coalition building skills are unparalleled.

What I admire most is your tenacity. The RAC's social justice agenda for civil rights, religious freedom, and economic fairness is a constant effort. When you look at transformative legislation like the healthcare reform bill, it took a generation to bring it into law. The RAC made a real difference in the health reform effort.

Judaism believes in the equality of opportunity because every man and woman is created in God's image. And Judaism espouses the importance of community support to make sure no one is left behind.

These values are embodied in the RAC. And these are values I saw in my own home.

My family lived above a grocery store that my father Lou owned in South Central LA. When people hit hard times he would let them buy on credit. Well, he called it credit, but it amounted to dignity for fathers and mothers trying to put food on the table.

My Uncle Al ran a newspaper, the LA Reporter – often called the Waxman Reporter - that featured stories about corruption. It ingrained in me the importance of accountability and transparency to ensure that consumers have confidence in the products they buy and that workers have a fair playing field to ensure their safety and job security.

The concept that a safety net should be available to make sure that no one is marginalized is a constant theme in Jewish law. Jews are commanded to reach out to the widow, the orphan and the stranger; to remove obstacles in the path of the blind; and to invite all who are hungry to share the taste of freedom at the Passover seder.

One thing that impresses me most about the RAC is how you engage your grass roots around the country. The Washington office is not an island unto itself. Social action is a hallmark of the Reform Synagogues in Los Angeles and around the country.

I especially love to see the high school students who come through my office through the RAC's L'Taken Social Justice Seminars. It's a tremendous opportunity to inculcate Jewish ethics and values in the next generation and to teach young people to be engaged in the world around them.

Our Jewish values teach us to embrace these opportunities every day and to look for opportunities to engage in tzedakah and Tikkun Olam.

It is an inspiration for my work in Congress and it is an inspiration for the work the RAC is doing to make our community, our country and our world a better place.